

Western Press, Government Smear Soviets

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By JERRY F. HOUGH

In the week following the Chernobyl nuclear power plant disaster, the Western press rushed to judgment. Soviet claims of limited deaths were ridiculed; damage to the Soviet economy was supposed to be enormous. What limited information the Soviets did release was said to demonstrate that Soviet leader Mikhail S. Gorbachev's announced policy of greater openness was a fraud.

Now it increasingly appears that the Soviet version of the events at Chernobyl has been closer to the truth than the original Western stories. And the way the Soviets have been expanding the amount of news indicates that Gorbachev really does have a more open information policy.

We are quick to point out what we see as the failure of the Soviet system. Perhaps our experience and trying to report on Chernobyl will teach us that we should look closer at the realities.

Several years ago, for example, the Western press was filled with stories about meat shortages in Soviet stores. But these stories never pointed out that at the time, Soviet per capita meat consumption was still on the same level as that of Britain, that Soviet citizens eat their big meal at noon and that the lunchtime cafeterias always sold meat dishes (or once a week, fish) at low prices. And how often is it reported that per capita meat consumption has been rising rapidly again in the last four years and that meat is quite available

again in the stores? Another example, also from several years ago, is the attention the Western press gave to reports of rising infant mortality in the Soviet Union. Scholars are now looking at the data and concluding that the increase never occurred. The Soviet statistics had essentially been falsified under the regime of Nikita S. Khrushchev and a change in reporting procedures had produced the appearance of a rise. Soviet infant mortality today is slightly higher than in the United States, but it has not been increasing drastically.

What has gone wrong?

First, McCarthyism remains strong in the United States on the Soviet question. Soviet-bashing is safe. Favorable stories on the Soviet Union will draw complaints and even charges of pro-Sovietism. It is easy to go down the path of least resistance.

Second, the U.S. government has enormous influence on the American interpretation of the Soviet Union. Scholars receive funding from the government, they are drawn into consultation with the Central Intelligence Agency and must clear their publications on sensitive questions.

Most press stories concerning events in the Soviet Union come from Moscow and the attentive reader will notice how often "diplomatic sources" are cited for interpretation. The job of the diplomat is to represent the interests of the Administration. The diplomat knows that a story

presenting the Soviet Union in a favorable light will not get him favorable ratings at home. Correspondents who report the embassy interpretation are essentially reporting the Administration line as objective analysis.

Ultimately, the only solution to the problem is a Soviet information policy that gives correspondents other sources to report and that points them to important statistics and developments. But we too need to be more careful.

For diplomats based in Moscow, it is useful to smear the Soviet Union abroad. They propagandize the correspondents partly so that the stories will come back into the Soviet Union on Western radio. However, we are also propagandizing the American people. The Soviet defense buildup that did not occur from 1975 to 1983 resulted in a doubling of the American debt because of a belief in a "relentless" 5% Soviet increase in arms spending.

Eventually, an Administration can even come to believe its own propaganda. Wanting to protect the United States if Gorbachev does not come to a summit here this year, diplomats put out a line that he will lose face if he does not seek a second session with President Reagan. The Administration, believing that it does "have the Soviet Union on the run," then begins to think it can push Gorbachev around without suffering any ill consequences.

It is all nonsense. If Gorbachev does not come to a summit, it is because he already has said that there is no use for talks unless the Soviet-American atmosphere is improved and progress has been made on arms control. The signs that the Soviets are shifting from an American-centered to a European-centered foreign policy are multiplying each month. If the United States does not want to deal with Gorbachev, he will find Western European leaders who will.

Just as it was during the Calvin Coolidge and Dwight D. Eisenhower Administrations, America under Ronald Reagan is in a period of illusions about its role in the world and wishful thinking about its prosperity. Unless the Administration changes its confrontational policy and starts making fundamental progress on such important Soviet-American issues as troop reductions in Europe, the bubble may soon burst. But what is the hope of avoiding that when our own information policy toward the Soviet Union is so closed and biased?

Jerry F. Hough is a professor of political science at Duke University and staff member at the Brookings Institution.

Grows Up

res skill at letting go. It does not to all of us. Women are, after all, d abruptly with that awesome dent. We are expected to come glue to ensure our children's nes, we begin motherhood by e of our children. Then, year by the bond grows more and more f motherhood, when my deepest le, uninterrupted bath, had no te, this letting go would be. fice is a batch of new books, all ising teen-agers. If there were a t would read: "How to Control ough-love vernacular of the keep the lid on, hold tight the hem, through this threatening f the teen years were a variation I would never come. e like that, never did. These are e carefully, transfer power over n. At best, when it works, the

controls aren't wrested from us in some primal struggle between the generations, but are shifted. At best, each right is traded fairly for a growing proof of responsibility.

But I know it doesn't happen easily or gleefully. Growing up is no easier the second time around. Mother and child both trip over the ambivalence that litters the passageway.

Even at the cusp of adulthood it is never entirely clear that our children are really ready to go or that we are really ready to let go. If little is said about children at the cusp of adulthood, even less is said about the 17th, 20th, 30th Mother's Day in a woman's life.

I cannot fully chart the terrain of this mothering time. My sentiments will not fit on a card. But I do know that at the other end of the stage I am going through, most mothers hope that they will have enabled rather than prevented this growing up. We want to be like the mothers we want to have: trusted resources in our children's lives. We want to be the home they can come to, the base they can touch, the love they can count on, the place where they feel good about themselves. What is left at the end of this stage is, after all, a relationship. Even a friendship.

We cannot get there without letting go. But sometimes, if we are good enough friends with our children, we can still hold hands crossing the street.

Ellen Goodman is a syndicated columnist in Boston.